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SUBJECT: Lebanon: Media Reaction - March 23, 2009

Atmospherics:

Over the weekend, most newspapers' lead stories and headlines welcomed President Obama's message to the "Islamic Republic of Iran" and to the Iranian people and "leaders." Several newspapers characterized this initiative as "unprecedented," noting that it reflected "serious" change in the U.S. rapprochement towards the Middle East and Iran. On Monday, however, editorialists "scratched below the surface" and tried to look at President Obama's speech "realistically." An editorialist close to Hezbollah questioned whether the U.S. is "squeezed" to the extent that it has to reach out to countries like Iran. The same editorialist also asked doubtfully whether the United States and its allies are contriving a new mechanism to confront their enemies in the region. Other less radical journalists also cast their doubts, noting that the United States should really be intending to engage in a fair dialogue with Iran, otherwise, it will fail.

Selected Headlines

"Will the American Message on the Occasion of Nowruz break the 'boiling' years? And how will it be interpreted on the Arab and Lebanese Levels? Obama: Leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Your Celebration is Blessed" Arab nationalist As-Safir

"In a Message on the Occasion of Nowruz that Was Void of Superior Language: Obama Surprises Iran with Extending His Wishes and With 'A New Day'" Moderate, anti-Syrian An-Nahar

"Obama Removes Iran from the 'Axis of Evil:' Diplomacy to Sove differences..." Pro-Sunni Al-Liwa'

Block Quotes:

"Any American-Iranian Rapprochement Is Expected to Impact Positively on Lebanon," an editorial by Khalil Flayhan in moderate, anti-Syrian An-Nahar (3/23):

"Governmental, parliamentary, and Lebanese parties' circles noted that U.S. rapprochement towards...the Iranian people and leaders may open a new phase of calm in the region...which in turn will impact positively the local situation in Lebanon. ...The same sources noted, though, that ...Khamenei's response to President Obama's message showed that he was not overly impressed by Obama's style and approach, and was really frank and tough in his response. ...Tehran believes that the U.S. has oppressed Iran...and wants it to lift the commercial and financial ban it has imposed on Iran since 1995 and wants it to lift the sanctions it has imposed on Iranian banks. ...Tehran also wants a change in the U.S. position which was expressed by President Bush when he characterized Iran as one of the 'axis of evil' countries..."

"American Naivete and Iranian perspicacity," an editorial by Rafiq

Khoury in centrist Al-Anwar (3/23):

"It is not new for a U.S. President to send a message to the Iranian people on the occasion of Nowruz. This has been a White House tradition since President Roosevelt and the U.S. alliance with the Iranian Shah. ...For Iran and the U.S. to tango, however, they need to reach an agreement over the music. So far the U.S. is tangoing on the music of changing Iranian behavior...while Iran wants the music of changing U.S. policies, and correcting mistakes against Iran. ...No one knows when both countries will agree on one common musical score. ...The question is: Are we witnessing a new edition of American naivete and Iranian perspicacity? Or are we witnessing a journey of discovery which will eventually lead to conflict? ...There is a big difference between a player who plays poker, in this case the United States, and a player who plays chess..."

"Is the U.S. Talking to Iran, or Dictating?" an editorial by Rami Khoury in English-language The Daily Star (3/23):

"...The American gestures to Iran seem sincere and serious, but from the Iranian perspective they still suffer from the persistent structural weakness of dictating the rules of the game to Iran and others in the Arab world and Asia, rather than engaging in a genuine dialogue. This flaw should not detract from the constructive effort that the Obama Administration is making, or blind us to the real shifts it has already initiated. At some point, however, Obama has to decide if he wants to dictate rules or engage in real dialogue because the two cannot happen together - especially if the standards of behavior the United States wants to see from Iran are often ignored by Washington itself along with its closest allies, such as Israel. We can celebrate Nowruz together and usher in a genuinely new spring, or we can celebrate April Fool's day soon; but in the world of diplomacy and political relations we cannot do both at the same time."

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